Designing a Qualitative research project: Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

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Conceptual Framework

- The system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform your research
  - Explains either graphically or in narrative form the main things to be studied— the key factors, concepts or variable— and the presumed relationships between them (Miles and Huberman 1994).
  - A tentative theory of what you think is happening and why?
What is theory?

- A simplification of the world, but one that aims to clarify or explain some aspect of how the world works

- Theory should tell an enlightening story, that gives new insights and broadens our understanding

- A theory is something to be tested and explored, it is not determinative.
What is the function of theory in your research design?

Informs the overall design:

- Helps assess your goals
- Helps you to develop and select relevant and realistic research questions and methods
- Helps you to identify potential validity threats to your conclusions.

- Can we map out a conceptual framework for your current work?
Conceptual Framework

- Often labeled the “literature review”
  - Why is this potentially dangerous?
    - Your theory of what is happening is something YOU build, it is not found
    - Uncritical “literature review” can make your conceptual framework overly descriptive
    - “The literature” is not THE authority, it is a fallible source of ideas and ways of seeing the world.
    - You need to think about what is useful and what is not, what is missing, and how can you fill the gap?
Conceptual Framework: Logically linking the components of the research design

Goals: What do you want to know and why?

Methods: How will you answer your questions?

Interpretation: How will you understand your results?

Research Questions: What specifically do you want to know?
Developing your Conceptual Framework

Try to answer these questions:

- What do you think is going on with the issues, setting or people you plan to study (what is your theory)?
- What established theories, beliefs, and prior research findings inform your current understanding of what is going on?
- What literature, preliminary studies, and personal experiences will you draw on in your research and why?
Developing your Conceptual Framework

- As you develop your conceptual framework keep in mind:
  - How are my goals influencing this framework?
    - Am I introducing bias
    - Can we think of an example where this would be the case?
  - What do you know and what do you need to find out? What are the gaps?
    - This will move you toward specific questions
    - Will help you to think critically about the existing theories/literature
Interactive Model of Research Design

- Goals
- Conceptual Framework
- Research Questions
- Methods
- Validity

Source: Maxwell 2005
Research Questions

- Don’t think of the questions as your starting point.
  - Remember qualitative research is Inductive and Interactive

- While you will have general questions in mind, detailed research questions should be worked out once you have formulated your Goals and Conceptual Framework.

- Why?
Functions of Research Questions

- **Two main functions:**
  1. To help you focus your study
     - In terms of your questions’ relationships to your goals and conceptual framework
  2. To provide guidance on how to conduct your study
     - In terms of your questions’ relationship to methods and validity
1. Confusion between research issues (what you want to UNDERSTAND) and practical issues (what you want to ACCOMPLISH)

- Research questions should *connect* clearly to practical issues but in general your study cannot answer practical questions such as “what is the best way to target FISP?”
  - To address this practical issue RQ focus on what we don’t understand.
  - Eg “why do wealthy farmers disproportionately access FISP?”
Common Confusions in Developing Research Questions

2. Don’t confuse research questions with interview questions or focus group guidelines
   - Research questions identify what you want to understand; interview questions generate the data you need to understand these things

   - What is a practical example of this distinction?
   - Are there cases when it is appropriate to ask a respondent your research questions directly?
Formulating Research Questions

Three issues to keep in mind:

1. Framing questions in general versus specific terms
   - Tendency to frame questions in general terms and operationalize through site and population selection
   - Depends on the study: Being specific can be more productive
     - Eg “how do seasonal production differences affect how vegetable wholesalers in Soweto market manage price?”
2. Instrumentalist versus Realist questions (Maxwell 2005):

- Instrumental questions: formulated in terms of measurable or observable data:
  - Suspicious of inferences
  - Eg “what are the *reported* challenges to increased hybrid seed use by smallholder?”
Formulating Research Questions

- What are some concerns with strictly instrumental qualitative research?
  - Lead to rigorous but uninteresting conclusions
  - May lose sight of what is really going on
    - Eg: Feelings and beliefs held by smallholder about seed types or trading systems or particular traders may not emerge as observable data or direct responses.

- Realist questions and analysis:
  - Researcher may infer from the data what is going on;
  - Observations and responses are evidence to be used critically
Instrumentalist versus Realist

- Research question “What are the market access conditions for maize as reported by smallholders?”:
  - 10 focus groups asked “where do farmers sell their maize in this village?”
  - All respond “we don’t have a market for maize”
  - “Where do you sell?”
  - “To briefcase businessmen, the FRA doesn’t come here”

- How would you deal with this paradox?
  - Instrumentalist may stop here. Observable data presents a paradox, but not willing to infer
  - Realist will revisit question: “How do smallholders’ beliefs about the private sector influence their understanding of market access conditions?”
Don’t be afraid to infer, to explore questions about beliefs, intentions, or values

- But be explicit.
- Rigorously acknowledge and try to address threats to the validity of your conclusions (e.g.: how do your personal or intellectual goals and assumptions influence your interpretations)

- Variance questions: Differences and correlations
  - How much? Is there? To what extent?

- Process questions: How? Why?
  - Which type of questions are better suited for qualitative methods? Quantitative methods?
Formulating Research Questions

- Variance questions are often best answered by quantitative methods:
  - Eg: To what extent does land size influence smallholder commercialization?

- Process questions better suited for qualitative methods:
  - Questions about the meaning of event or activities
  - Questions about influence of social or physical context on event and activities

- How could qualitative methods usefully extend the above variance question?
Questions to Ask Yourself

- When developing your research questions ask:
  - What specifically do I want to learn or understand by doing this study?
  - What don’t I know about the subject?
  - What are the questions your research will attempt to answer and how are they related to each other?
    - As you do this start to think broadly about what methods are most appropriate: qual vs. quant.
    - How will you interpret your findings? Instrumental vs. realist interpretations.
Thank You